



Institute for
European Studies
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Policy | brief

Is Information Warfare Breaching the European Parliament?

Issue 2016/12 · May 2016

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Russia's Connection to European Populist Parties

The link between Putin's Russia and European populist parties is emerging as a key concern in European foreign policy circles. The affiliation of the European far right with the Kremlin is naturally the most pronounced,² but there is also an unmistakable pattern of alignment between radical left positions in Europe and trends of foreign policy thought in Moscow.³ For the European far right, Putin's uninterrupted reign since 1999 represents a victorious expression of their own neo-conservative ideology and the governing potential of the right-wing.⁴ Conversely, the European radical left could be drawn to Russia through historical communist links and Putin's anti-capitalist mannerisms.⁵ Hence, although European populists start from different ideological backgrounds, their perceptions of Russia converge when this serves their Eurosceptic agendas.⁶ Thus, across the populist spectrum, Putin's Russia is seen as a strategic ally for European states and a counterweight to the 'ever closer' European Union.

Concern is also growing for the financial links between Russia and the European populist parties and/or individual politicians. The Front National (FN) is a case in point: Marine Le Pen borrowed nine million euros from First Czech Russian Bank (FCRB), and she was in talks with the Kremlin about another loan.⁷ Reportedly, in 2016, Le Pen confirmed this transaction and stated that she was going to ask for more money from Russia with which she intends to fund her upcoming presidential campaign.⁸ But the FN is only the tip of the iceberg as, conceivably, the number of European parties receiving financial support from Moscow is large enough to warrant the emergence of a wide pro-Russian bloc in Europe.⁹

Populism and Russian Information Warfare

Russia seems capable of juggling with very different political parties from the radical left to the neo-conservative right. This capability is wired in Russia's information warfare, a relatively new concept that still comes with several tags, such as cyber war or 'weaponised disinformation'.¹⁰ Information warfare is designed to manipulate or confuse public opinion with intentionally false material, which is spread through the use of social media (including trolling) and a network of state-sponsored media outlets.¹¹ When the Russian information warfare became a key element of its operations during the Ukraine crisis the West took notice;¹² since then, the transatlantic community has increasingly realised that Russia might be using information warfare in order to support populist parties.¹³

The success of populist parties in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament suggests that pro-Russian narratives are working their way into the institutional corridors of the EU. This policy brief will attempt to identify these narratives expressed by MEPs from the European National Front (ENF), European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL) and Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) groups inside the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). Their general voting behaviour has been studied elsewhere.¹ Here, this general pattern will be re-examined with additional emphasis on specific narratives delivered during the procedure of tabling amendments to a number of Russia-related parliamentary reports voted in AFET. The analysis of these parliamentary amendments provides additional evidence to substantiate the claim that European populism demonstrates a remarkably coherent pro-Russian stance, which includes positions propagated by Russian information warfare.

Russia's information warfare is attractive for both left and right wing populists because the Kremlin frames its foreign policy decisions with an anti-establishment rhetoric based on false or even fabricated news.¹⁴ In this way, Russian foreign policy is not bound by a neo-conservative or any other ideological agenda, and therefore Putin's interest in the European far right is not based only on coinciding political affinity.¹⁵ Quite the contrary, the Kremlin is adopting a nihilistic geopolitical approach.¹⁶ Since the ideological divides are not as clear-cut now as they were during the Cold War, Russian propaganda can charm a wide and disparate assortment of political forces.¹⁷ The Russian ambition is that populist pressure will erode the Western liberal narrative in front-line states of the European periphery.¹⁸

Pro-Russian Narratives in the Committee on Foreign Affairs

With regard to the Ukraine crisis a key element of pro-Russian narratives is to describe the annexation of Crimea as 'incorporation,' 'attachment' or even 'reunification' with Russia. This has been suggested by a bulk of almost identical amendments to the draft report 'on the strategic military situation in the Black Sea Basin' proposed by ENF's Jean-Luc Schaffhauser (FN) and GUE's Pablo Iglesias and Javier Couso Permuy (Podemos).¹⁹ The latter two recognised the Crimean referendum as legitimate referring to the right of self-determination as a lawful motive for the secession, and proposed another two amendments while reminding the Committee of NATO's 'war in favour of Kosovo's secession from Serbia in 2008'.²⁰ The draft report on 'EU-Russia Relations' received amendments deleting any reference to the Crimean annexation from Georg Mayer, Harald Vlimsky (Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)) and others from the ENF, as well as from the non-attached Giorgos Epitideios (Golden Dawn).²¹

Another key element of pro-Russian narratives is to accuse NATO, the EU and the Ukrainian government of unjustifiably provoking Russian aggression in Ukraine. Roughly the same group of the aforementioned MEPs proposed amendments that cited actions of NATO or general 'American provocation'²² as the cause of the military escalation. A specific reference was made to the 'Sea Breeze maneuver'²³ in the Black Sea and NATO's 'Immediate Action Plan'.²⁴ GUE's Iglesias and Permuy termed NATO's enlargement with Eastern European states as an 'expansion' made without 'close consultation with Russia'.²⁵ In the same AFET Committee report GUE's Helmut Scholz accused the EU of attempting a coup in Russia, while fellow GUE Members Iglesias and Permuy also charged the EU with the 'overthrow' of the 'democratically elected Ukrainian government'.²⁶ In addition, AFET Members coming from ENF, EFDD and GUE blamed the Ukrainian government for violating human rights and freedom of expression; for being a 'threat to the stability of the region';²⁷ for having links to nationalists, extremists, and even fascists and neo-Nazis or paramilitary groups that have committed massacres and war crimes.²⁸ In another AFET report an ensemble of ENF Members proposed an amendment quoting a widely circulated piece of disinformation attributing the destruction of flight MH17 to the Ukrainian government.²⁹

Overall, inside the AFET Committee members coming from ENF and GUE in particular, repeated the populist themes concerning Russia and the US. These political groups supported Russia as a strategic and valuable trade partner (at least as valuable as the US) that shares common interests with the EU.³⁰ As a major supplier of energy, Russia is supposed to contribute to EU energy security.³¹ Therefore, EU-Russia relations should be improved and rivalry should be avoided.³² What is more, the European Neighbourhood policy should even anticipate a 'convergence' between 'EU and Eurasian integration'.³³ In almost every relevant AFET report the same group of MEPs did not neglect to refer to EU sanctions on Russia (following the Crimean annexation) as an 'unnecessary,' 'unfair' and 'ineffective' measure that was employed to the detriment of the Russian people and the interests of the EU.³⁴ Repeatedly, the same group of MEPs asked the EU to lift or discontinue the sanctions.³⁵

The contrast regarding the US was stark: some ENF Members deplored US hegemonic power, which resulted in the 'geopolitical subordination' of the EU, the 'subjection of the peoples of Europe,' the threat of a 'world government' and the abandonment of the Eurasian project.³⁶ Supposedly, it was the continuing

'American and Atlanticist propaganda' that damaged EU-Russian relations.³⁷ The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) was slated as a 'strategic error' that should be suspended, as it threatened to 'destroy national sovereignty'. Likewise for GUE, the TTIP was also a mistake that will result in loss of national sovereignty³⁸ and favour the interests of transnational corporations;³⁹ elsewhere GUE's Iglesias and Permuy regretted Europe's 'dependence' on American policies and 'Euro-Atlantic elites'.⁴⁰

Not Breaching, but...

The examination of populist themes and language used inside the AFET Committee of the European Parliament reveals yet another aspect of the already established connection that far left and far right groups have with Putin's Russia. It also demonstrates a remarkable coherence of pro-Russian attitudes across the populist spectrum. However, despite the spectacular rise of the European populist parties in recent years, their electoral percentage is still inconsequential for the decision-making process and the legislative procedure in the European Parliament – simply put, all the aforementioned amendments were ultimately rejected by the AFET Committee. This conclusion suggests that representative democracy is particularly resilient in information warfare and that populist, pro-Russian narratives still have a long way to go before breaching the European Parliament. But, this is not a reason to be complacent about the EU response to Russian information warfare.

The European reaction to mounting populist pressure from the left or the right also includes a tendency to resort to alternative, direct formats of democracy such as the referendum. The ambiguous referendum in Greece last summer, the more recent one in the Netherlands on the EU-Ukraine Association agreement, and the forthcoming UK referendum on EU Membership signal the emergence of a pattern that may be extended with referendums on forthcoming proposals for any EU treaty change or conceivably for lesser matters such as the TTIP. And referendum campaigns, in deep contrast to rigorous parliamentary procedures, can be especially vulnerable to information warfare.

A possible response to such vulnerability is to acknowledge that Russian information warfare is far more sophisticated than a few trolling farms and some viral hoaxes. It is based on an anti-western worldview that existed prior to the current regime (and will most likely outlive it). And the Kremlin does seem keen on returning to a historical pattern of geopolitical confrontation with the West.⁴¹ Hence, Russian narratives are making full use of the historical memory of their audiences⁴² and as a result, the implementation of Moscow's strategy is segmented and region-specific.⁴³ In other words, the Kremlin chooses to highlight different narratives depending on the audience: from the Russian Empire to the incompatibility of the Orthodox faith with Western Modernity, and from the Soviet win against Nazism to the role of the liberal world order in the collapse of communism. This kind of segmentation, specificity and historical approach should also become an essential element of a comprehensive Western strategy – one that will expose the contingency of the Russian narratives, while at the same time appreciate national historical memories and the diverse paths of Europeans to liberalism, to modernity and to the West itself.

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